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The international-mindedness journey: School practices for developing and assessing international-mindedness across the IB continuum

Summary developed by the IB Research department, based on a report prepared by:

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BACKGROUND

International-mindedness is an overarching construct related to intercultural understanding, global engagement and multilingualism. The concept, which is particular to the International Baccalaureate (IB), is at the heart of the IB's educational policies and programmes. The objective of this study was to examine how IB World Schools conceptualize, implement and assess international-mindedness and to understand related challenges. Additionally, the researchers aimed to identify promising practice in developing and assessing international-mindedness. This research summary will focus exclusively on the practice of international-mindedness in order to offer the greatest utility to schools. For a more comprehensive understanding of the findings, please see the full report.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Two pilot schools and nine case study schools (see table 1), identified as being strongly engaged with international-mindedness, were selected for an in-depth examination of their practice and thinking related to international-mindedness. The schools were chosen to reflect a range of educational stages (Primary Years Programme, Middle Years Programme and Diploma Programme), contextual factors and locations. A multi-method approach was adopted, including: interviews with heads of school; focus groups with leaders, teachers and students; classroom observation; a parent survey and document analysis, to gain a variety of perspectives at each school. Data were analysed in order to identify how international-mindedness is defined, practised, assessed and problematized across the schools.

Pseudonym	Country	School type	Programme studied	No. of students in programme
Peace (PYP)	USA	Public (Title I)	PYP	588
Trent (PYP)	UK	International	PYP	118
Nile (PYP)	Qatar	International	PYP	414
Tigris (MYP)	Jordan	Private	MYP	433
Danube (MYP)	Finland	Public	MYP	186
Hudson (MYP)	USA	Public	MYP	1,392
Amazon (DP)	Indonesia	International	DP	178
Colorado (DP)	USA	International	DP	160
Mekong (DP)	China	International	DP	236
Colne (PYP) (Pilot)	UK	Public	PYP	462
Thames (DP) (Pilot)	UK	Private	DP	26

Table 1. Summary characteristics of the nine case study schools and two pilot schools.



FINDINGS

Defining international-mindedness

The study revealed a great deal of nuance and variation in how participants defined and interpreted international-mindedness. Many students and staff expressed difficulty in defining international-mindedness as a whole. For example, as one principal remarked, “It’s a contested concept, it means different things for different people” (Principal, Amazon, DP). Additionally, a student noted, “For me, it was hard, just thinking about the definition of international-mindedness because it depends on the person, what you think of personally” (DP student, Colorado, DP). However, this lack of clarity was not necessarily seen negatively by participants. On the contrary, the lack of consensus was seen as “a little bit of the beauty of it [international-mindedness] too” (Principal, Peace, PYP).

While schools had a wide range of different definitions and ways of framing international-mindedness depending on their context, at heart, these conceptions centred around the idea that international-mindedness is relational in that it is about “reaching out”, in how we interact with others, and “reaching in”, to understand ourselves in relation to others. Additionally, there was an overwhelming sense that international-mindedness is not an endpoint but rather a journey, a constant process of defining, acting, learning, reflecting and re(de)fining. This process was seen as being more important than the definition itself.

Practising international-mindedness

Leadership

In all of the case study schools, the principal and/or senior leadership team played a significant part in leading or envisioning work around international-mindedness. This included ensuring that international-mindedness was embedded in the life of the school at a strategic level, for example, through mission statements and policies that inform practice and procedure. Champions were also significant in driving work on international-mindedness forward. In all but one case study school, there was a named international-mindedness role, a member of the staff with responsibility for this area of work. Additionally, student participation, including involvement in school decision-making, was encouraged to provide opportunities to model and develop aspects of international-mindedness.

Professional development

Having a focus on international-mindedness in staff professional development (PD), as well as induction, was perceived to be a significant aspect of a school’s work on international-mindedness. Staff benefit from opportunities to explore what international-mindedness is and what it means to them personally as well as how students can be supported in developing the trait. While study participants noted that many IB workshops touch upon international-mindedness, they also suggested that there is a need for more dedicated PD in this area.

Language learning

Across all of the case study schools, language was seen as a key element in the development of international-mindedness. All schools actively encouraged language learning both for its perceived cognitive benefits and for its direct links to international-mindedness. Language itself was seen as a window into culture—through learning and understanding how a language works, learners were thought to gain insight into other cultures and ways of thinking.

Moreover, a substantial emphasis was placed on “home” or “mother tongue” language in language policy and provision. Language was seen as part of identity, and encouraging students to speak their own language sends the message to students that they are valued. As one of the PYP principals explained, “Allowing them [students] to speak in their mother tongue really builds that compassionate understanding from students, that it’s OK to speak whatever language they speak in, and to build that comfort level.” (Principal, Trent, PYP)

In many of the case study schools, multilingualism permeated the life of a school by encouraging the use and development of home languages, host languages and any other languages relevant to the school community. Participants explained this is valuable because it demonstrates a school’s commitment to international-mindedness. Both study participants and the researchers stressed the importance of embedding multilingualism into school policy and practice.

IB curriculum

The IB curriculum and how it supports international-mindedness represented a particularly strong area of the research findings. Participants provided examples from specific areas of the curriculum (subject areas) and also highlighted strategies that teachers use to foster international-mindedness. The following vignettes and selection of participant quotes illustrate some of the ways that the IB curriculum supports the development of international-mindedness in the MYP and DP. Readers should note that many additional examples, across all of the programmes discussed in this study, can be found in the full report.



The MYP “global contexts” were considered an important part of developing international-mindedness at the Tigris school. The school supports teachers in connecting global contexts into their lessons in the following ways.

- All MYP teachers receive a bi-weekly newsletter keeping them up-to-date with events that are going on around the world to help them make links to the global contexts within their subject area.
- Teachers also found it helpful to map the global contexts to the key concepts of their subject area to assist with planning.

One student reported:

“In every single lesson, we’re relating to a global context, for example, change, competition, development...and just relating to all of that also makes us more internationally minded because we’ll know how to relate things in the future.” (Student focus group, Tigris, MYP)

Vignette 1. Global contexts (Tigris, MYP).

Curriculum focus	Example/ commentary
Mathematics (MYP)	<i>“In math ... I’m more concerned about the world itself, I have a project, ‘The Future of Natural Resources,’ and when they do that particular project, they get to choose any natural resource in the world ... like koala bears, and panda bears ... and when we are using it as a human species—when is it going to end? There’s a finite amount, we’re using it, it’s going to end, eventually. So they graph that. Then they have to reflect on that: how is that going to affect them? How is this end of oil going to affect you, and when is that going to be? So they have to write about that” (Senior leader focus group, Hudson, MYP).</i>
Geography (MYP)	<i>“In our geography lessons, we focused a lot on the topic of refugees around the world. We did various case studies about countries that host refugees, and I think, we learned more about the refugees in Jordan and Jordan is one of the largest refugee hosting countries in the world, currently, and I think that was important to learn” (MYP student focus group, Tigris, MYP).</i>

Table 2. Examples of international-mindedness within specific curriculum areas.



To coincide with the commemoration of the First World War, students at Amazon shared stories of their relatives who lived through wars. This involved research and interviews with family members. Outcomes from this task were displayed in a main foyer of the school on a wall of stories and images. The wall brings together stories from all over the world, including from those who were enemies and whose children now study together at the school.

The “remembrance wall” is seen by the school as an important expression of international-mindedness. It is perceived to be an effective way of analysing and understanding plural perspectives, in this case by sharing family stories from opposite sides of a deadly conflict. As one school leader explained:

“[it is] a perfect example of just how internationally minded our school and our students are, I reckon, for remembrance, if you went into any 10 schools in the world, you’d probably have very traditional remembrance poetry, pictures, the poppies, very European, in terms of its history, and this school has got none of that. What it actually has is a wall of remembrance from every possible nationality ... people in the same class, whose relatives, or distant relatives, were actually fighting on opposite sides of the war; I can’t think of a better example of international-mindedness” (Senior leader focus group, Amazon, DP).

Vignette 2. Remembrance wall (Amazon, DP).

Creativity, activity, service (CAS)

CAS, a core component of the DP, was highlighted by all three of the DP case study schools as an important driver of international-mindedness in the programme. Participants believed the focus in CAS on thought, action and reflection make it a powerful mediator of international-mindedness. For example, one DP student highlighted the benefits of not only thinking about international-mindedness, but also acting in an internationally minded way.

“In my opinion, service is a really key component of being internationally minded because as great as it is to have all these global ideas and beliefs ... you have to act on it ... sometimes, we lack the local perspective, which I think is equally important. CAS ... kind of combines those two things ... the combination of local service and international mindedness, because if we are not connected to the community we are directly in, as well as the global community, then I don’t think we are doing our job right as international citizens” (DP student focus group, Colorado, DP).

The following vignette illustrates an ongoing, successful CAS initiative from the Amazon DP school.

The Amazon school takes community engagement very seriously. This CAS project involves partnerships with the local community and, in particular, residents of the local shanty communities (Kampung).

A micro-school for local children (25 children) was set up through CAS about five years ago. It is a sustainable project now with two permanent teachers. It is located in the grounds of a multinational company about a 10 minute drive from the school. The project is managed by students from the Amazon school who assume responsibility for all aspects of the micro-school through their CAS work.

The micro-school serves the most vulnerable children from the Kampung who have spent their previous lives begging or working on the rubbish tips. The school now employs a gardener, two teachers and a cook/helper from the Kampung itself. Children who leave go on to secondary school if they can get a scholarship or by funding themselves through small businesses run within the micro-school. One of the teachers was himself a former student; he was awarded a scholarship into secondary education, continued to make excellent academic progress and is now a university night school student (accountancy), working every day as a teacher at the micro-school.



Photo. Working with children from the Kampung (student photograph).

Vignette 3. Micro-school (Amazon, DP).

Discussion and conversation

Classroom discussion and conversation were identified by participants as an essential way in which schools can enact IB curriculum so as to maximize opportunities to develop international-mindedness. In this context, discussion refers to both discussion between students and between students and teachers. On a basic level, these findings reflect the importance of learning to talk to people who are different from oneself:

“Because you are bringing children who all come from different families ... different traditions, different ways of interacting with people, and that in itself is a way of being internationally minded, if you can begin to learn how you’re going to interact with others ... that begins to lay the ground work, so that, later on, when you’re older, and you do have more knowledge, you will ... be really ready to be open-minded, and ready to engage with others” (Senior leader, Peace, PYP).

Taking opportunities to draw on students’ personal experiences and viewpoints was also considered a strategy for developing international-mindedness, thus avoiding the potential bias of imposing a teacher’s or the “correct” view:

“Use students as a resource, so, rather than going in and doing a lesson where you’re talking about some of the geography of the Middle East maybe just asking the students, ‘Can you explain this?’ ... What’s your understanding of the situation with Palestine, what are the origins of this? So you use the students to do that rather than imposing any kind of your own views ... and then maybe you can ask probing questions, or deeper questions, to get a wider appreciation or understanding of the situation, rather than going in and saying ‘well this is the situation’ I think that’s the main strategy we try to use” (Principal, Tigris, MYP).

The findings from the case study schools suggest that ideas and questions that emerge naturally through discussion and conversation can contribute significantly to the development of international-mindedness. In particular, student-led inquiry, where students prompt questions and are given avenues for inquiry, provides rich opportunities for exploring international-mindedness.

Modelling international-mindedness

A recurring theme of the study was the importance of direct exposure to the sorts of traits associated with international-mindedness. Seeing first-hand what it is like to be internationally minded, as modelled by teachers and peers, gave the kind of personal experience necessary to promote a powerful sense of international-mindedness. Vignette 4 illustrates some of the ways that teachers can model international-mindedness.

Many staff and students spoke of the importance of teachers in modelling international-mindedness, reflecting the adage that “more is caught than taught”. Here are some of the attitudes and behaviours that were regarded as important in teacher role models:

- sharing their own experiences and viewpoints with students. Using examples from real life to illustrate points
- using artifacts, quotes or pictures in their classrooms to bring their subject to life and to reflect their own interests and passions
- being prepared to respond to students’ questions and discuss difficult or controversial issues with their students, such as national identity or conflict
- encouraging safe and respectful conversation in their classrooms
- challenging disrespectful behaviour or comments
- having no tolerance for bullying
- being friendly and respectful to everyone in all interactions and saying hello and building relationships with cleaning, catering and support staff.

Vignette 4. Teachers as role models.





CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that intentionality is one of the hallmarks of promising practice with regard to international-mindedness. All of the IB World Schools involved in this study were intentionally thinking about and actively working on the conceptualization and development of international-mindedness. This was not something that was taken for granted or left to happen as a result of adopting an IB programme or having a diverse school population.

Additionally, this study has shown that it is important for schools to make international-mindedness their own, suited to their particular communities and contexts. This can best be understood as a journey. In this ongoing journey, the school community:

- 1) discusses and defines international-mindedness
- 2) develops practice
- 3) assesses and evaluates international-mindedness.

As noted at the beginning of this document, only a snapshot of the many practice examples shared by schools could be included in this summary. Readers, and especially IB World Schools, are encouraged to engage with, reflect on and debate the many more practice examples and experiences that can be found in the full report.

This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at ibo.org/en/about-the-ib/research/. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

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